

Message Text

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 00700 301512Z
ACTION NODS-00

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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 0700

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FOR ATHERTON FROM CHARGE'

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, IS, US, LE
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN LEBANON

REFS: STATE 20946, STATE 20960, STATE 20961

1. YOU WILL, OF COURSE, WANT TO MAKE YOUR OWN JUDGEMENT OF WHAT AMBASSADOR DINITZ IS TELLING YOU REGARDING THE DOMESTIC SITUATION HERE AND HOW THE MOVES AROUND NABATIYAH ARE SEEN BY THE ISRAELI PUBLIC. OUR ASSESSMENT OF THE MEDIA COMMENT AND DISCUSSIONS WE HAVE HAD THE PAST FEW DAYS LEAD US TO CONCLUDE THAT THE GOI DISCRPTION OF THE LEVEL OF PUBLIC CONCERN AND TENSION ARE EXXAGGERATED.

2. RADIO ISRAEL NEWS BROADCAST AT 1400 HOURS TODAY DID NOT REPORT ON THE CABINET MEETING THIS MORNING, BUT QUOTED PERES TELLING A BONDS MEETING THAT ISRAEL DOES NOT SEEK A MILITARY CONFRONTATION WITH SYRIA BUT HOPES FOR A DIPLOMATIC SETTLEMENT. AT LEAST AS MUCH ATTENTION ON SAME PROGRAM WAS DEVOTED TO SKIING CONDITIONS ON MOUNT HERMON, WITH NARY A WORD ABOUT A NEARBY THREAT. MEDIA COVERAGE REPORTS WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SOUTHERN LEBANON AND THAT MESSAGES ARE BEING PASSED BACK AND FORTH BY THE U.S. YEDIOT AHRONOT TODAY HEADLINES, "WASHINGTON MESSAGE TO DAMASCUS NOT TO DEVIA
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FROM RED LINE." HAARETZ HEADLINE SAYS, "U.S. PRESSING SYRIA TO WITHDRAW FORCES;" ANOTHER SYAS, "SYRIA ASSERTS GREAT PUBLICITY IS PREVENTING RESOLUTION OF THE NABATIYAH AFFAIR." THE POST HEADLINES, "U.S. DEFUSING SITUATION IN SOUTH LEBANON." PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION HAVE ALSO REPORTED SOUNDS OF GUNFIRE AND ARMED CLASHES BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND PALESTINIAN VILLAGERS BUT TODAY'S RADIO REPORTS THE AREA IS QUIET.

TELEVISION LAST NIGHT REPORTED THAT ISRAEL HAD SENT A MESSAGE TO SYRIA BUT IT WAS NOT CHARACTERIZED AS AN ULTIMATUM.

3. IN OUR EFFORTS TO COVER THE DOMESTIC SCENS, WE HAVE TALKED TO A NUMBER OF POLITICAL FIGURES, OBSERVERS, AND JOURNALISTS THIS PAST WEEK. WHILE OUR CHIEF SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION WAS THE DEVELOPING POLITICAL CONTEST, LEBANIN WAS ALSO TOUCHED ON AND THESE DISCUSSIONS HAVE NOT INDICATED ANY UNDUE ALARM. FOR EXAMPLE, I SAW RABINOWITZ, EVRON, AVINERI, AND ZADOR; YOU HAVE SEEN MY CABLE ON AVINERI'S COMMENTS REGARDING LEBANON. THE FACT THAT THE OTHERS DID NOT COMMENT ON THAT SUBJECT LEADS ME TO CONCLUDE THAT A SENSE OF CRISIS, CURRENT OR IMPENDING, DOES NOT EXIST.

4. WHAT DOES EXIST, HOWEVER, IS THE CONTINUING PRESSURE AND DIVISION WITHIN THE LABOR PARTY. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE ARE REPORTS CIRCULATING TODAY THAT MEIR AMIT AND OTHER LABOR STALWARTS ARE ABOUT TO ANNOUNCE THEIR DEPARTURE FROM THE LABOR PARTY AND THEIR JOINING WITH YADIN. THERE IS ALSO, OF COURSE, COMPETITION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE OPPOSITION IN THIS ELECTION CAMPAIGN PERIOD; THE OPPOSITION'S CALL FOR A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE SEVURITY AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF THE KNESSET SHOULD BE SEEN AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE MINORITY POSITION OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE KNESSET. IN OTHER WORDS, THERE IS CONCERN WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT ABOUT EVENTS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, BUT THAT CONCERN IS AT LEAST PARTLY ATTRIBUTED TO THE FEAR THAT THE GOVERNMENT AND PARTY ARE TOO DIVIDED TO MEET A POTENTIAL DANGER. THESE DIVISIONS, I WOULD SUGGEST, HAVE LED THE GOVERNMENT TO OVERREACT SO THAT IT CAN CONVINCE THE PUBLIC THAT IT IS INDEED A STRONG TEAM.

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5. IN SUM: I DO NOT WISH TO CONVEY THE IMPRESSION THAT WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SOUTHERN LEBANON IS NOT SERIOUS NOR THAT WE SHOULD NOT RESPOND TO ISRAELI REQUESTS THAE WE CONVEY THEIR CONCERN TO OTHERS. HOWEVER, I WISH TO POINTOUT THAT, SEEN FROM HERE -- AND BASED ON THE APPARENT ABSENCE OF MILITARY PREPARATIONS, ON MEDIA REPORTING AND COMMENT, AND ON OUR CONVERSATIONS OF RECENT DAYS --UNTIL NOW THE LEVE
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OF PUBLIC CONCERN AND PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT IS CONSIDERABLY BELOW CRISIS PROPORTIONS.
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